

The Burden that is Art

by Mary Helene Warner

The suffix added to the word “art” to describe its creator carries equal weight. One can not exist with out the other. Last week was the art opening for Benin Ford, Shalishah Franklin, Felandus Thames, Darlene Thomas, and Michael Yates, artists whose works are currently on display through March 4 at Southside Gallery. The following essay is based on interviews conducted that evening.

Attending art an opening is an opportunity to meet the artist. I recall receiving an invitation to one at the Tate Modern for Donald Judd. To my dismay the artist would not be there – he had been dead for some time. Still, while it is not my belief that the artist should stand stationary by their work to answer questions, it is only natural for humans to seek out a creator. In Oxford, Southside Gallery affords that opportunity once a month.

Shalishah Franklin

With the exception of Benin Ford who resides in NYC, by seven o'clock in the evening, all of the artists in the current show had arrived at the gallery. In the back of the space, a collector of Jere Allen's work stood next me while I took notes on *Concealer*, a painting by Shalishah Franklin. The painting depicts a voluptuous woman dressed in red and wearing a similar shade on her lips. She appears to be walking away from a backdrop inscribed with the word “war.” Juxtaposed to the woman and on top of that word are the silhouettes of two men whose faces disclose fear.

Here is a lesson in perspective. The woman standing next to me believed the men to be hiding, although from what, she was not sure. Only after I pointed out the letters in the background did she understand the painting's political statement. Red is blood. War conceals reality. The dots were connected. This painting, which ironically recalls those promotional war posters made famous by the first and second world wars, in its contemporary context, becomes a condemnation. Red is no longer in vogue.

Franklin, a successful Memphis advertising executive, by nature is a proficient social commentator. In her mixed media painting, *Home*, she utilizes the frame of a screen door for the frame of a painting. Within the composition, the worn face of black woman emerges from darkness with a young white boy on her hip. Her face glows gray as she peers around to see who is there; however, only after reading the words scrawled on bottom right-hand of the painting do we realize what she represents. “3,000 solidiers,” it says “won't be coming home.”

Michael Yates

Michael Yates also likes red. His glossy images, all parts of a whole, recall the pages of a fashion magazine. Not that his gives us a full sense of the women he depicts, or feel we know them at all. That is his point. He purposefully leaves us a bit unsatisfied, just as we are in life. In *Bonus Eyes* a woman's body is divided into separate images, each one representing an ideal part of a full woman. Be it the scalpel or the wandering eye of a man, a splattering of red paint across these images indicates the kind of severance necessary to create the ideal form. Flinching in front of Yates' conceptualized woman is to be expected.

In the rear of the gallery is *Fetish*, Yates' expansive mosaic of women's lips. For the artist, this parted sea of red symbolizes life. Isn't it true too, that the act of kissing tends to initiate that cycle. Not all of the photographs depict lips. In one, twine plays a role. Those with an imagination will immediately make the connection between the twine and the work's title. Yet twine can also suggest bondage in an unsettling way, perhaps the way people feel when involved in an unhealthy relationship, or the way our society tends to highlight the “tying down” that occurs when “tying the knot.”

Darlene Thomas

Church was once a place, and still is for the faithful few, in which women wore their finest. At one time in history, Darlene Thomas explained, working black women who were resigned to wear mundane clothing during the week, donned their finest clothes on Sunday. That also included wearing elaborately designed hats. *Church Mother* depicts one such parishioner whose confection-like head accessory rises into the shape of cake.

Thomas's other career as an illustrator results in paintings that are delightfully fun and engaging (interesting subjects), unbelievable (elongated necks), but also possible. Thomas related that when one woman stood in front of *Crown of Dignity*, another painting in which a woman wears a fine hat, the viewer said that she felt as though she were looking at her own mother on Sunday. Thomas's skill as narrator and artist allowed that woman's story to emerge from the wall and exist. Bringing stories to life is what she strives to archive as an artist.

Felandus Thames

The temptation to ask Thames how he constructs his mixed media boxes is unbearable. The artist, who is a designer in an architectural firm, won't disclose the secret, but we can guess. Viewed up close, the boxes recall the View-Masters of our youth, and as such, they invoke feelings of nostalgia. It is fitting that the most striking of the subjects he presents are those of New Orleans.

The terracotta and turquoise doors ubiquitous throughout the French Quarter make an appearance in *Bourbon Street 02*. Layers of colored film lit from behind draw attention to a transparent girl who walks hand-in-hand with her anonymous guardian. Sweetly dressed with her hair half-swept up and positioned between a modern construction barrel and her guardian who wears shorts, she becomes an anachronism. Which New Orleans is this – one of the past or of the future?

Layers figure prominently throughout Thames' work. While the mixed media light-boxes utilize minimal elements to produce his desired effect, Thames' paintings tend to employ any number and any kind of materials. An example of his intricate layering technique is best seen in a painting honoring the life of James Baldwin. In this painting the stenciled letters of "HARLEM" are emblazoned across imagery of a man who is reading over the side of his bed, scenes of police violence, and other symbols of the civil rights movement. To reinforce the role Baldwin played in affecting change, Thames spelled out the author's name with the letters from the keys of a typewriter.

Benin Ford

Benin Ford cites James Baldwin and Toni Morrison as having an "incalculable impact" on his work. He admires the post-war painter Francis Bacon, and also the realist Lucian Freud. Ford's paintings, although reality-based, reference history and elevate the mundane. Even without knowledge of this we can look at *Meet*, his painting of a cow sticking out his tongue at a man, and understand the significance of the gesture.

Readers of Morrison will be delighted to learn that this painting is actually a direct reference to "Beloved." In one scene in the book, Paul D, a former slave, recalls with the protagonist a moment in which he was particularly humiliated on the plantation. Paul D explained that even worse than the pain of his physical punishment was the experience of walking past roosters and watching them observe him in his degraded state. This image was present when Ford began painting *Meet*.

It was his parents Alder and Henry C. Ford, Jr., not the artist, who told me that Ford was a Romare Bearden scholarship recipient at Davidson. A graduate of the Pratt Institute, Ford's background in art history is no doubt a reason for why his work dabbles in narration. Art historians are often artist themselves who are constantly balancing fact with imagination. For Ford, art is about creating a "silent sensuousness," an effect achieved when, as Bacon puts it, "the texture of the paint communicates more violently than anything else." Although Ford's paintings can be enjoyed without a storyline, his work can not be processed without producing one.

While it is true that people tend to avoid art openings because of the crowds, if we were to act by that excuse, Claude Monet's *Sunflowers* on display at the National Gallery in London or the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre, would lack for visitors. The fact is they won't, and hopefully never will. People continue to flock to those paintings, standing together in close quarters as they heave, strain, and wait, sometimes impatiently, to commune with the art, and in way, the artist. Perhaps why Monet and DaVinci's paintings continue to be revered is not necessarily because of history or skill, but because of the gravity produced by those communal pilgrimages. Who then is so certain that in one hundred years there won't be people waiting and vying for a view of the work by the artists currently on display at Southside Gallery? Only the cynics, I hope.